LANDMARKS IN SOME ARTISTIC CAREERS

The American Painter On the Way to His Goal

By Royal Cortissoz

The Macbeth gallery, having already made a good record in the matter of exhibitions this season, saves its best effort for the last. It presents a collection of American pictures which are not only interesting in themselves, but which, taken together, have an uncommonly instructive significance. This is a "comparative" show, which is to say, that the men in it are represented so far as possible by works of their early, middle and late periods. The light thrown on the development of this or that personality is entertaining and, incidentally, it turns the observer's thoughts into the realm of general ideas. From the experience of the individual one may divine something of the nature of one of the most fascinating problems in art, the problem of a painter's growth.

What Is Gained, and Lost, by Convention

There is a group of half a dozen landscapes in this exhibition which serves admirably to illustrate that period in the history of the American school which was dominated by convention. It commemorates the Hudson River men, the painters whose talents were formed under the influence of so strong a tradition that their works have a kind of family likeness. Naturally, the first impulse of those who have come after them and whose imaginations have been enriched by initiations of which they knew nothing, is to discount all their principles and especially that traditional family likeness. Does the likeness not speak of convention? And is not convention, beyond all peradventure, a deadening thing? See how it has reduced a group of individualities to one common denominator of dulness! These reflections are natural, as we have said, but they are not altogether well founded. Convention, by which we may understand the accepted habit of a group, has brought some virtues to that group. Consider the skill with which Sanford Gifford puts his panoramic view of landscape together and then trace the same merit of composition through the pictures by Samuel Coleman, William Hart and James D. Smillie. Look to the sterling thoroughness with which these painters draw their tree forms, define textures, and attain, in short, to a certain valuable truth. Look, finally, to the success with which they illuminate their canvases, filling them with a cool, dry light. Surely the convention which taught them the necessity of these things, making them conscientious, thoroughgoing workmen, is not altogether to be despised. Moreover, they shared in a convention of sentiment, as in a convention of technique, which has its winning aspect. They were types of a sort of graceful repose, of a placidity which was not without its elegance. A fairly good case might be made out for their serene, finished conception of landscape as against the episodical and often positively raw transcript which is nowadays so much more fashionable. But it is not the business of criticism to make out "a fairly good case." To attempt to do so is to confess that there is something radically wrong somewhere in the subject, and in admitting the flaw in this one we reach an important lesson of the present exhibition.

The failure of the Hudson River men to survive among the vitalized exemplars of landscape is not an indictment of convention, as though convention were some mysterious and deleterious compound, warranted to act like poison on any one imbibing it. Poussin and Claude painted landscapes of a conventional order and made masterpieces of them. Failure in this matter is purely personal. It is the man, not the convention, that gives out. The Hudson River school failed not because it was composed of good painters misled, but because it was composed of uninspired painters—accomplished, sincere, capable up to a certain point, but without the creative impulse that can withstand what is insidious in convention. Thus the show uptown enforces the first great element in the problem to which we have referred, the problem of artistic growth. It is the element of individuality. The proof is only too obvious here. One has only to turn from the Hudson River group to those painters who are linked with it in point of time, but whose gifts caused them to rise above its influence. It was not by any means because they were mad against convention that they rebelled. It was simply that they were born to paint, where the others never had that instinctive warrant. The true pioneers of American landscape are Homer Martin, Alexander H. Wyant and George Inness. Compare their paintings with those of their Hudson River contemporaries and the difference is seen to be one of personal ability rather than of scholastic tradition.

Homer Martin, for example, was always a little in sympathy with the Hudson River School. He looked at mountain and lake in Adirondack scenery at the beginning in much the same way. His key, so to say, was for a time in harmony with that of the others. But Martin had genius. It comes out in his color, but even more in his conception of landscape art in the large. He paints with a stronger, more powerful gesture. Convention is brushed aside. The artist is simply himself. Accordingly his three landscapes in this exhibition have a solidity and a freshness which Gifford or McEntee never knew. And his work, early and late, is all of a piece. His surface manner developed. At the centre he always was an original master. The Wyants here invite the same comment, though, as it happens, less interestingly. The examples of him are not particularly suggestive. Inness, on the other hand, invigorates the theme. His three pictures are like a biography in little. "The Passing Shower," dating from 1860, when he was only thirty-five, has all the traits of the beginner, the exact notation of detail, a certain carefulness which is explicit in everything. It is, as a whole, comparatively inert. But the personality is there, genius is feeling its way. It foreshadowed in absolute clearness the breadth of the "March Breezes" of 1885, and the gorgeous virtuosity of the "Sunrise," a masterpiece done only two years before he died. Another man of his generation, Winslow Homer, spans the same gamut in the same way from his familiar Civil War picture, "The Bright Side," to his brilliant "Driftwood" of 1909. By the time you have absorbed the effect produced by these two painters you realize that convention is indeed a harmless factor in the development of art. It hurts only those who are unqualified to rise above it. To the true artist it is a negligible thing.

Personality and Its Alliance With Technique

Our problem, then, is clarified so far as its relation to things of convention is concerned. Personality, we have seen, is the root of the matter. But it is not a talismanic resource, something which by itself will win the day. The usefulness of the bulk of the pictures in the Macbeth exhibition lies in what they have to tell us of the part played by technique in the exploitation of personality. What happens when to the man we add his method? There are two types involved in the answer. One is the man who is mastered by his method. The other is the man who masters it. Mr. Arthur B. Davies is a good representative of the first of these types. In his earlier work he uses a method like unto that which has served an endless succession of painters, and alike in the "Landscape" of 1890 and the "Alchemy" of 1908—one of the most charming of his echoes of the Italian renaissance—he is able successfully to express the poetic ideas which are of the very grain of his talent. Then, in 1918, he makes his "Dancers" the sketch for a decoration, and makes it entirely according to the Cubistic hypothesis. The beauty of his early period vanishes into thin air. Method invades him and strangles his art. To see what it means to keep method where it belongs, a means to an end, let us turn to the most conspicuous figure painter in the show.

As regards technical manner there is a whole world of difference between Mr. Dewing's "Hermit Thrush," a landscape with figures painted in 1889, and "The Spinet" which he produced in 1904. Another note is struck again in the "Lady in White," which belongs to his latest period. But the differences are not fluctuations. They do not mean that in one case Mr. Dewing has mastered his technique and in another has lost control of it in a sad confusion. He has known all the time precisely what he was about; his method has been like his brushes, something to be taken up and modified, adjusted, as the subject has required a change. His essential ability has remained stable. It brings up an important point—the artist's attitude toward his work. Let a painter once receive a thorough training in his craft, and if beauty pure and simple persists as his ideal he can, in a sense, leave technique to take care of itself. That is, he will paint well because his standard carries with it a kind of unfailing spiritual support. Let him wander off after false gods, theorize, develop fantastic conceptions of what art is intended to be, and his technique will suffer. It is curious to observe how in contemplation of a picture like "The Spinet" one ceases presently to dwell upon either technique or subject. One is held, rather, by the indefinable beauty of the thing, the romanticism which exhales from the tapestried background—painted with no romantic purpose whatever—the grace of the player at the spinet, the charm in the poise of her head, the poetry belonging to the whole scene. Out of doors, in "The Hermit Thrush," Mr. Dewing works the same spell. He has no story to tell, yet his design has substance, makes an appeal to the imagination. It is a case of artistic personality making beauty manifest. Method is the servant, not the master.

Beauty is the great solvent, the element which more than any other fixes the artist's rank and makes his title clear. Yet, paradoxically, it is the element which gives a picture atmosphere and envelops it in mystery. The hardest types to define are those in which it dominates the most triumphantly. Mr. Dewing's development defies analysis, the alliance between personality and technique has been with him so long and so consistently maintained. The formation of that alliance is a little easier to identify in the work of Alden Weir. He was preoccupied with technique in his first period, the period of his vigorously painted "Still Life." In his growth the cultivation of a subtler ideal has been the fruit of years. Let the observer think back from the exquisite picture of "The Orchid," shown here as of the year 1910, to an early salon piece like his big window scene, with figures, in the Metropolitan. A whole gulf lies between. Twachtman, too, began with his feet on the solid earth of pure technical adroitness, as in his "Arques de Bataille," of 1885, and ended with the diaphanous loveliness of his prime, the "Niagara," 1900, which illustrates his impressionism with imagination superadded. There are definite steps and transitions, as Weir and Twachtman remind us, in the progression made by some artists.

These steps are taken largely under the pressure of spiritual transformations. Men paint better pictures as their natures gain in stature, as imagination grows richer and mellower, as thought grows deeper. But there are types in which the gain seems almost entirely a matter of practice in manual dexterity. The better picture comes not so much because the artist has a nobler vision, as because he uses his instruments with greater ease. Mr. J. Francis Murphy, as a type, lies somewhere between the two extremes. The contrast between his early and late landscapes is one indicating that to some extent he sees nature more emotionally as time goes on, but, even more, uses his technique with greater breadth. The increase in breadth is almost exclusively a matter of technical habit with most of the other exhibitors here, Mr. Carlsen and Mr. Davis, Mr. Hassam and Mr. Melchers. Mr. Daingerfield, who has always been imaginative in theme, has heightened the value of what he has to say by becoming more subtle in his way of saying it. Mr. C. W. Hawthorne, a realist with imaginative impulses, is a merely clever brushman in his picture of 1902, "Fisher Boys." "The Primroses," a figure piece dating from the present year, exemplifies the advance he has made by refining upon his method, struggling toward an ideal of beauty. That, nominally, is the goal of every man represented in this exhibition. The artist, as artist, is supposed to be dedicated to beauty. But the lesson of the show is the ancient lesson that, while many are called, few are chosen, and that personality holds the answer to the riddle.

It is the central, unfailing source of victory or defeat. Personality was not strong enough among the rank and file in the Hudson River school to resist submergence in convention. The moment it developed power, as in Martin, Wyant and Inness, it led to substantial achievement. In the later men it has triumphed according to its potency. It interpenetrates technique, without which it is helpless, and raises technique to its own high level in proportion to its instinct for beauty. However it functions, it is irresistible and decisive. There is nothing metaphysical about its processes or results. We have been at some pains minutely to analyze its aspects in this "comparative" exhibition. But the net result of what that exhibition has to tell us may be stated in a nutshell. Comparisons, no matter how far they may carry us, always bring us back to one simple fact, that a man is born to paint a good picture or he is not. Convention, technique, the method of a school, the method of a man, are all secondary to the matter of the inborn gift. There is no real artistic growth without it, any more than there is floral growth without seed.

THE SPINET
(From the Painting by T. W. Dewing at the Macbeth Gallery)

Random Impressions In Current Exhibitions

At this late hour of the season the one-man show is, nevertheless, as frequent as ever. Mr. Childe Hassam will present a collection of his New York street scenes and flag pictures at the Milch gallery next Tuesday, the exhibition continuing through June. At the Knoedler gallery there are paintings and drawings by Mr. Morton L. Schamberg.

Mr. John Elliott has drawn a series of portraits of Victor Chapman, Henry Coit, Hamilton Coolidge, and other young Americans who lost their lives in the war. They will be placed on view at the Knoedler gallery to-morrow and will be sold for the benefit of the Permanent Blind Relief Fund.

The current exhibition at the Anderson galleries is one of drawings, etchings, wood engravings and lithographs. The collection of nearly two hundred pieces is to be sold next Monday evening. The drawings include examples of Claude, Cuyp, Gainsborough and divers old Italians. The prints range from Rembrandt to Zuloaga. There will begin at this place on May 22 an exhibition of colonial and modern furniture and other art objects to close the estates of the late Arthur Page Brown, the architect, of San Francisco, and of other owners. The sale is set for the afternoon of the 27th.

Mrs. Joseph Epes Brown has presented to the Brooklyn Museum, in memory of her late husband, a collection of books and prints. It embraces a complete set of the famous chromolithographs after the old masters published by the Arundel Society. An exhibition of these prints begins to-day at the museum and will continue throughout the summer.

A Persuasive Futurist From England

When the British War Salon was held at the Anderson Galleries in February one of the artists sent officially to the front, Mr. C. R. W. Nevinson, made a rather mixed contribution to the interesting ensemble. He is a clever young Englishman, who seems to have drunk deep at the futuristic fount presided over by the Italian innovator, Marinetti. He indubitably has talent. The designs in which he depicted the war from the futuristic point of view, landing in absurdity, were accompanied by others in which he conveyed valuable impressions of reality. We recognized him then as a type of sincerity and force, tempered by a queer artistic crotchet. Now, at the Keppel Gallery, he has a show all to himself, one of etchings, mezzotints, wood cuts and lithographs, in which, once more, he is both disconcerting and delightful. Only, even in the disconcertment on this occasion there are some amusing passages.

The burden of proof always rests upon the revolutionist in art. It is idle for him to talk about what he means. The thing itself must carry its own justification. Thus, for Mr. Nevinson to note in the catalogue that his lithograph. "Bomber," is "an abstract rendering in dynamics of a soldier throwing a bomb, is for him to lapse into irrelevance. Our interest lies only in the lithograph and that, as a work of art, is meaningless. There are repeated allusions to a "rhythmic" intention in the catalogue, and they generally leave us cold. But here and there something like justification appears upon the surface of the prints catalogued. The mezzotints, for example, have a curious sort of muffled eloquence. "From an Office Window" is patently fantastic, but the suggestion of London's roofs is unmistakable, and there is a positive charm about it, too. The "Wind," in which tree forms are given an odd resemblance to blown tulips, is likewise beguiling. Partly the success of these plates is due to Mr. Nevinson's technical proficiency. He is an undeniably skilful man with his hands. Frequently, in his arbitrarily conceived etchings of scenes at the docks and on the front his angular, faceted play of light and shade almost reconciles us to his strange philosophy of art.

But his best things are those in which little of the philosophy intervenes between us and the good drawing through which he records what he has seen. The etching of "The Cursed Wood," for example, in which the tortured tree trunks of Delville Wood, on the Somme, seem taken from some tragic modern equivalent of Shakespeare's "blasted heath," needing only the "enter three witches" for the dramatic illusion to be complete, is not only a strong piece of naturalism but a superb piece of technique into the bargain. Over and over Mr. Nevinson affirms the authentic quality of his art in this way. His line is not Whistlerian in the sense of its having intrinsically a fine and personal quality, but it is a firm, strong line and he does effective things with it. Whistler, by the way, would not have disdained to make such a lithograph as the "Dawn at Southwark," the best of all Mr. Nevinson's performances. When he keeps his eye on the object, as in this instance, giving nature its chance and avoiding the pitfalls of the Futuristic hypothesis, he is not only efficient but delightful. Another good specimen of what we may call his normally handled work is the "Survivors at Arras," an architectural subject out of which he has made a plate dimly recalling D. Y. Cameron's accomplished art. Going through the exhibition on the lookout for such productions we are also struck by the interest residing in all its aspects, even those which are a little grotesque. Mr. Nevinson has intelligence and vitality. He stimulates curiosity in every one of his prints, be they Futuristic or artistic.

There is a small but choice exhibition accessible just now at the Kouchakji Gallery. It consists of Mesopotamian and Persian pottery, Indo-Persian miniatures, ancient glass and some small bronzes. The pottery and glass are particularly brilliant and the miniatures make a little exhibition by themselves. Amid the pressure of countless modern things this collection of antiques makes a refreshing oasis, a kind of fairyland of form and color.

(More Random Impressions will be found on page nine, this section.)

Calendar of Current Exhibitions

Academy Art Shop, 153 West Fifty-Seventh Street—Twenty-eight oil paintings by Toshi Shimizu, to May 24.
American Institute of Graphic Arts, 10 East Forty-seventh Street—Second annual exhibition by the Art Alliance of America and the American Institute of Graphic Arts, to May 24.
Anderson Galleries—Spanish paintings, drawings, etchings, wood engravings, Colonial and modern furniture.
Arlington Galleries, 274 Madison Avenue—Marines and landscapes by Clifford W. Ashley, to June 1.
Belnord Galleries, Amsterdam Avenue and Eighty-seventh Street—Paintings and sculpture.
Brooklyn Museum—Joseph Epes Brown collection of books and prints.
Devonshire Lace Shop, 60 Washington Square—Exhibition of antique laces.
Ehrich Print Gallery, 707 Fifth Avenue—Wood-block prints in color, to May 28.
Ferargil Galleries, 607 Fifth Avenue—American paintings and Macdougal Alley sculpture.
Gimpel & Wildenstein Galleries—Decorative paintings.
Grolier Club, 47 East Sixteenth Street—Exhibition of bookbinding, to June 15.
Hotel Majestic, Central Park West and Seventy-second Street—Exhibition of paintings by Chapman, Cooper, Curran, Gaul and others, to June 2.
Kevorkian, 40 West Fifty-seventh Street—Exhibition of sculpture by John Mowbray Clark, to June 7.
Knoedler Galleries—John Elliott's portraits of young Americans who lost their lives in the war. Paintings and drawings by Morton L. Schamberg.
Keppel Galleries—Etchings, mezzotints, woodcuts and lithographs by C. R. W. Nevinson.
Kingore Galleries, 24 East Forty-sixth Street—Exhibition by French contemporary artists, to May 22; spring portrait exhibition in sculpture and painting by contemporary American artists, to May 23.
Kouchakji Galleries—Mesopotamian and Persian pottery, Indo-Persian miniatures, ancient glass and bronzes.
Kraushaar Galleries, 260 Fifth Avenue—Paintings by Ryder, Monticelli and Luks, to May 29.
Macbeth Galleries—Exhibition of American paintings.
Metropolitan Museum—Exhibition of decorative designs by seventh, eighth and ninth year pupils of elementary schools of New York, to June 8.
Milch Galleries—New York street scenes and flag pictures by Childe Hassam, through June.
National Arts Club Galleries—Members annual sketch exhibition, to October.
New York School of Fine and Applied Arts, Broadway and Eightieth Street—Annual exhibition, to May 20.
No. 180 Madison Avenue—Exhibition of paintings by George E. Cook, through May.
Whitney Studio Club, 147 West Fourth Street—Exhibition of sculpture and decorative paintings, to June 1.